

## PEJORISM IN ALEX LA GUMA'S *AND A THREEFOLD CORD*

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### **Abstract**

This article examines pejorism in Alex La Guma's *And a Threefold Cord*. Employing the factors of characterization, setting and language it demonstrates that La Guma could be pejorative, in deference to his Marxist persuasion and his first hand experience, in his literary objective of letting the world know about the plight of the hapless non-whites in the apartheid enclave of South Africa. The implications of pejorism in the novel notwithstanding, it is the contention of this paper that its use by La Guma is not only a function of his realism as a novelist but also a function of his unflagging commitment to the cause of the oppressed, deprived and dehumanized all over the world be they in the wilds of Ajegunle in Nigeria or in the disease-infested slums of Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

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**Keywords:** Pejorism, apartheid, non-whites, deterioration, disintegration

### **Introduction**

A theory in literature states that socially conscious writers often set for themselves the rather onerous task of recreating the collective experience of a race, clan, sect or even a nation in fictional terms. And as long as it lasted, apartheid, the obnoxious policy of separate development that was formally renounced in the republic of South Africa in 1994, was a veritable nightmare of a sort whose experience was a collective one especially for the non-white population in South Africa. The common experience of the excruciating nature of apartheid constantly arrested the creativity of many non-white writers from South Africa as it constantly took the pride of place consciously or otherwise, virtually in all their literary works. During this period, says Clive Barret (1999:228), "literature acquired a peculiar importance in shaping international understandings of the nature of apartheid". Possibly, as a result of these "understandings", Attridge (1997:216) tells us that South Africa came to:

acquire a notorious centrality in the contemporary political and ethical imaginations which (gave) its writers a special claim on the world's attention.

Unlike many unconcerned white writers from South Africa, their non-white colleagues were utterly more apprehensive about the highly untoward happenings in the Republic. For, even for no other reason at all, relevance and artistic commitment dictated that the literary artist be as faithful as possible in portraying the group experience.

It must be stated, however, that it was not as if South African non-white writers were free to ply their trade. As was obvious then, taking the literary route in a repressive country like South Africa was akin to walking in a minefield or its equivalent, committing the Japanese hara-hiri. But still, against this background of a very inhibiting and highly censorious environment was the gargantuan problem that confronted the South African anti-apartheid writer: how to battle the issue of appearance and reality in South Africa's image to the world. To overcome this uphill task therefore, many of these writers – Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Oswald Mshali, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi – found solace in a constant aim which according to Adrian Roscoe (1977:225) was to “paint if necessary in the gaudiest of colours the grim reality behind the façade erected by the Nationalist government”.

Very much like the 18<sup>th</sup> century literary theoretician Henry Fielding, Alex La Guma had artistic consciousness right from the start. But whereas Fielding's literary objective was about human nature in “comic epic poem in prose” (Arnold 1974:67), La Guma's priority was a profound “concern with the contemporary South African scene particularly the experience of the non-white population” (Vinson, 1976:782) It is no gainsaying that La Guma's oeuvre no doubt displays what amounts to an almost religious devotion to this literary cause. In the process of doing this, however, La Guma's creative vision ranges farther afield into the realm of the pejorative. Many literary critics with a bias for South African literature (Adrian Roscoe, Michael Green, Wilfred Cartey, Samuel Asein, A. C. Jordan, Christopher Heywood, John Povey, T.T Moyana etc.) have come to regard La Guma as a frontliner in the literary struggle against apartheid. But virtually none has seen his literary works as pejorative albeit unconsciously. My task in this paper, therefore, is to explore the concept of pejorism in La Guma's second novel *And a Threefold Cord*. In demonstrating this unconscious pejorism attention will be focused on characterization, setting and language in the novel in question.

### **Pejorism As A Concept**

Pejorism is from the Latin word “pejor or “pejores” which means getting worse. *The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (2003 Edition) defines it as “a degeneration or lowering in the meaning of a word; giving a deteriorating effect or meaning, as to the sense of a word” (1931). It implies that things are always moving from better to a worse state. It is the belief that the world is deteriorating or degenerating in use or meaning. The linguistic cognates of pejorism include corruption, rot, decay and decomposition. These words themselves also go with their own cognates like shrinking, dwindling, emaciation, sickness and death. Pejorism in fiction can be traced to the works of Goncourts, Walter Pater, Paul Verlaine, Joseph Conrad and all the tribe of “fin-de-siecle symbolists whose works reveal their fascination with decay”. (Nnolim, 1982:207). In the African novel, Ayi Kwei Armah’s works come to mind easily. His first three novels *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1964), *Fragments* (1976) and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1981) pulsate with elements of pejorism in profusion; a feature that was later to fetch for Armah the literary ire of fellow Africans like Ama Ata Aidoo, Ben Obumselu and Chinua Achebe who felt according to Bernth Lindfors (1980:85):

that Armah’s vision was warped, that his **strong** view of African society; though brilliantly lucid, perpetuated the kind of distortion of reality that had existed throughout the colonial era and could ultimately prove harmful to the African revolution.

### **Pejorism In *And A Threefold Cord***

That La Guma is unarguably a writer of decay, disintegration and rot is seen in the manner he presents his principal characters, especially his non-white characters in *And a Threefold Cord*. The central crisis in the Pauls’ family is the fast deteriorating health of the family head- dad Pauls. As Ma Pauls tells Charlie to light the fire, we hear in the background “the wet phlegm-laden cough of an old man”(28). This is the first reference to the old man whose failing health has caused a big concern in the family. When we eventually come face to face with him, he strikes us like a faulty gadget that was once useful and functional but gradually losing its significance in a progressive deterioration. La Guma describes him as “a sick old man clinging with brittle nails to the tortuous cliff of life holding on with a last desperate effort” (34).

Once an impressive personality courtesy of his strength and height, Dad Pauls is now nothing but a framework of bones, a pathetic equivalent of a child’s drawing of a man with

his dark face clawed by sickness and want. Even his bones now show under his pale skin. Dad Pauls' now ghost-like personality is a function of the racist-motivated abject neglect and poverty. His physical deterioration which shows La Guma at his pejorative best reminds one of uncle Doughty in La Guma's first novel *A Walk in the Night* (1962).

His bony knees drawn up under the bedding ... quivered like a miniature earthquake; the whole body shivered and shook in the bed gripped by sickness and the drought that came through services and old nailholes ... his lipless mouth was open and his emaciated, old chest wheezed and whispered like a tea kettle, the body frame shaking like a mechanical toy. (84).

Although Dad Pauls may not have had a very glorious past like the decrepit and asthmatic Uncle Doughty, yet it is unbelievable now to recall that he once struggled through many odds, inclement weather notwithstanding, to build a house for his family. When Ma Pauls ironically remarks that "There's people going to be washed out, when it begins. The Rain," the tragic foreboding of Pauls' death becomes all too clear. In a way, Dad Pauls shares the same characteristic with Armah's Modin in *Why Are We So Blest?* (1974) in physical deterioration. Like Dad Pauls, the expansive and extroverted Modin, in the end has shrunk to his shell. His girl friend Aimee, even writes of him: "He just stays in his shell ... He has deteriorated a lot ... He's lost his drive" (283). George Mostert's loneliness has something with Modin whose diary on his last days shocks Solo by the extreme loneliness it reveals. The tragic end of Dad Pauls is inevitable, for death is the logical end to systematic disintegration.

Like Dad Pauls, the entire family has taken a turn for the worse. Jorny-boy prefers scratching around the rubbish heap with other children to going to school. Ronny seems to be getting wilder and wilder. His eccentric behaviour does not recognize the much orchestrated solidarity in the novel as he wanders about the dark settlement. His murder of Susie Meyer becomes the climax of his shattered image which leads to a long process of irreversible decline and damnation. Charlie is overwhelmed by the family's oppressive circumstance while the dull and unwedded Caroline is carrying a pregnancy for her inexperienced common law husband, Alfred. With Dad Pauls gone, the family looks set even for more disintegration.

The perennially drunk Ria is a study in degraded humanity. Like Miss Nzuba, she is used by the novelist to show the dehumanizing impact of the grinding apartheid machine. Totally stripped of all noble traits, she blends her degraded state with the all pervading

squalor and decay of her surroundings. La Guma shows us her picture which is now nothing but a squalid parody of a female:

Her hair straggled like wet and dirty straw, her clothes reeking  
of wine and vomit, and she cursed and wept and laughed about  
her in a voice as harsh as a death rattle. (54).

No doubt, her degeneration which unfortunately borders on the comic, is a symbol of wrecked humanity that is the bane of many a non-white South African.

Roman's degeneration, for example, has transformed him into a drunken savage who finds his highly fertile wife a ready-made punch bag whenever he is frustrated; which is often. Roman's brutality has reduced his wife to a mere rag doll whose teeth have been knocked to stumps and her face reduced to a bundle of scar-tissue. Uncle Ben, especially, cannot help his compulsive drinking habit which forces him "to go on swallowing till he's fall-fall with liquor", (81). Though unmarried, Uncle Ben lives in a little shack in the impoverished settlement "drinking away most of the little money he earned doing odd house-painting jobs" (77). His excessive drinking has reduced him to a wreck that is always dressed in holed jersey, worn and patched trousers with cracked and muddy shoes. The "evil" which Uncle Ben identifies as being responsible for a man's indulgence in excessive drinking is the apartheid regime whose oppressive machinery has forced many non-white South Africans into so many odd things in their struggle for survival. Thus, from Uncle Ben to Ria via Freda and Charlie, drunkenness has become the only friend to be clung to in the face of the system's frustration. Ironically, drunkenness itself further plunges these characters into the valley of social degeneration and ruin.

George Mostert, the white station owner, like the non-whites who live across the bar in the location, is the very definition of systematic deterioration. Economically strangled, he is now an inconsequential non-entity. His fellow whites have abandoned him. His wife too is rumoured to have run away with another man, a situation that has visited on him deterioration, loneliness and a sense of alienation. La Guma's description is revealing:

...his loneliness hung about him in the form of a spirit of  
enforced friendliness. ... Solitude clung in the half moons of  
black grease under his uncut fingernails and in the wrinkles of  
his rugose neck, in the dirty overalls and the ... dusty floor-  
polish. (66).

Though an abandoned wreck, Mostert still clings tightly to his wretched pride in a false racial superiority. This is why unlike Uncle Doughty in *A Walk in the Night*, he cannot

reintegrate himself in living in non-white community inspite of Charlie's and the prostitute's advice.

Significantly, Mostert's dwindling trade is a clear case of the problem of existence which confronts man, be he white, coloured black in a material culture where the essence of the individual is dependent on the material acquisition that lies under his control. (Asein, 1987:80).

Thus, from Charlie in his "soiled underwear" and "faded jeans" to the "muddy feet and ageless" layabouts who La Guma describes as a "motley collection of scarecows, dummies stuffed with poverty" (46), are characters mainly degraded non-whites who are like the dregs of humanity from the crime and disease-ridden District Six of South Africa the predominantly "coloured" area in Cape Town, where the dire consequences of the oppressive apartheid regime were experienced. Here is an unadulterated degeneration, decay, corruption and untold deterioration from the supposed norm which pejorism often subsumes with a touch of the bathetic.

For La Guma, it is a skillful marriage of degraded characters with their degraded tumble down, sterile and decadent shanties. The correlation between characters and environment is held together with the images of filth and unbelievable decline of the entire sub-urban culture. The close relationship between the squalor of the physical environment and the decrepitude of inhabitants is seen in La Guma's description of a street in the beleaguered District Six:

... It was the corpse of a street that died a long time ago, choked to death by neglect and left to be nudged and toed by the surrounding hovels which lay on its crumbling flanks like hyenas waiting to devour it. A few old brick and plaster houses still stood or rather tottered at intervals along the mined street. Most of their windows had gone and cardboard, box wood or stuffed rags gave the impression of rough patches over gaping eye sockets. Paint and plaster had fallen from the walls leaving raw wounds of brickwork and roof were held down with rows of boulders. (96).

In view of the pejorative description of this typical street in the shanty, one is hardly surprised at the inhabitants who are often sharply in defined stages of disintegration. "for, when they are not weighed down by burden of racial expression and the limitations arising

from various oppressive laws, they stand out as pathetic victims of actual pathological ailments” (Asein, 1984:91). What confronts the reader in the lavish repulsive details of La Guma’s leprous prose is a filthy environment riddled with the smell of rain mixed with the general smell of the settlement that is “fused into a pervading perfume of bitter dereliction” (101). This is a striking contrast to the affluent and indifferent community of the whites where roads are made of concrete with night traffic sweeping by and “rubber skimming over stippled surface sounding like sprayed water” (87). The beams from the automobiles of the rich whites carefully sweep above the tiny chinks of “malnourished” light that tries to escape from the sagging shanties. The night traffic is oblivious of the tumble down latrines that characterize the shacks of the non-whites. This is no doubts a trip to the world of Manichean binarism whose inversion, JanMohammed (1983:3) emphasizes, should be seen as an important criteriom for resistance literature

The warping and cracking house of the Pauls which groans like a prisoner on the rack is a symbol of their wretched and decadent state. The rooms are not only leaking in countless number of places but also full of all kinds of smell – sweat smell, slept- in- blankets smell, smell of airless bedding and the “smell of stale cooking and old dampness and wet metal” (21). The presence of a battered, cracked mirrored loose-hinged wardrobe completes the family’s abject poverty and neglect.

Ria’s degenerated state fits in very well with her squalid immediate environment with it’s “stench of the gapping latrines, the scent of fertile earth and dead leaves, “(53). The brutal and jobless but sexually active Roman, with his ill-clad and pot-bellied children and wife, lives in “what looked like an amalgamation of a kennel, a chicken-coop and a lean-to shed” (103), whose meanness defines the word dilapidation. There is, of course, the emphasis on the visible sign of outright deterioration of the physical structure of George Mostert’s service station and garage which reminds us of the degeneration and abandonment of its owner:

the white paint on the outside of the building has long been violated by the elements and careless drivers. There was history written in the fender -scars and hub cap marks, the dried up pools of grease like the congealed blood of dead business in the chipped and battered enamel signs and the torn and faded bunting like the shielding and pennons of slain enterprise hung up for the last time in furious defence .(65).

Thus, with the state of unbelievable decline of his once impressive establishment, one wonders why Mostert does not now see the hollowness in his rabid racial pride. Alex La

Guma's skilful concentration of details of the shacks of the non-whites enhances his social criticism.

Like their shacks, the language of these characters, with a possible exception of George Mostert, is a mark of their degenerated state. Theirs is a pot-pourri of Black American slangs and snatches of the Afrikaaner language. This is manifested in such words as "dingus", "mos", "bokkies", "dring", "kerrel" and "oppie". It is a roughly strong idiom that is racy and pithy and which has been called "Englikaans", a dialect of Cape Town's mixed-race ghettos that blends Afrikaans with English. Their language, like their faces reflects their drift, vagrancy and the almost uselessness of their lives.

### **Significance Of Pejorism In *And A Threefold Cord***

La Guma's rather pejorative "fascination" with the rot, filth, smells of neglect, degeneration, cultural bastardy and hysteria on the part of the non-whites in South Africa rings not only with his celebrated realism but also with some political overtones. This is because by laying emphasis on the sordid details of the environment and the ghostly non-white characters that live there, La Guma exposes the abnormalities in the system of apartheid as symbolized by the elemental assault. Despite Benita Parry's uncompromising rejection of realist fiction as oppositional, La Guma's presentation stirs the conscience of the reader to the harsh realities of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

But even with this creative recording of the "here and now" of the Cape Flats, La Guma skillfully avoids the pitfalls of illusionary narratives by deromanticizing the oppressed characters of the apartheid regime and the struggle itself. By not idealizing and deifying the oppressed while at the same time demonizing the oppressors in a stark manner, La Guma not only refuses to reduce a complex historical dynamics to a post colonial binary opposition but succeeds in avoiding what Njabulo Ndebele (1991:39) calls "spectacular representation".

La Guma's evocative prose appeals to one's senses as a way of enhancing the realistic mode in the narrative as well as creating a sense of the immediate. A vivid impression of the filthy environment is conjured up in the mind of the reader. There is the skilful adoption of an integrating symbolic framework built around the metaphor of the storm and the intensity and persistence of its assault. Our focus is narrowed down to the embattled world of the Pauls' family under the siege of the storm and its bitter struggle for survival. The Pauls' family itself is a microcosm of the non-white society in their shanties which has to contend with utter helplessness and a sense of abandonment to an unsympathetic universe. The unusual resilience of the shanties against the batterings and elemental assault is a metaphor for the



way in which the inhabitants themselves have held out heroically against the negative and crippling forces of their environment.

Through the work one finds a deflationary characterization rather than inflationary. Instead of the imagery of enhancement, progress, augmentation or increase what we do have is the imagery of defeat, decay, frustration, disappointment, shrinking and dwindling which are “all subsumed under the figurative language called bathos, since in pejorism all movement is anticlimactically pointed”. (Nnolim, 1977: 208).

In spite of the harrowing experience of the non-whites the novelist does not leave us without some elements of optimism that help to tone down the grimness of the narrative. The intensity of Caroline’s labour pains notwithstanding, the regenerative value attached to the expected delivery of her baby is a symbol of hope for the oppressed people in South Africa. This hope is manifested in the birth of a new generation of joyful children playing on the rubbish dump. The solitary carnation flower blooming in the midst of death, decay and disintegration is also a symbol of hope for the non-white South Africans in their struggle for survival amidst a thousand inhibiting forces. This optimistic vision, says Kathryn Balutansky (1990:52) “functions as a reminder that a portrayal of the desperate condition of Black people under Apartheid is by no means a surrender to it”.

Even so, the redemptive value inherent in the symbolic flight of the phoenix-like bird as Charlie Pauls stands at the kitchen door is unmistakable. Thus, from the ashes of death, degradation, decay and disintegration that constitute the lot of the oppressed non-white South Africans in the several dehumanizing shanties may yet emerge, like the classical phoenix, regeneration, birth and redemption. This is no doubt a far cry from the almost cosmic-pessimism teleguided pejorism of Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1964). For, Armah unlike La Guma, seems to see despair and futility as parts of the twentieth century malaise.

The grimness of the narrative is a function of pejorism. Critics like A.M. Strachan, however, have always seen the rather sordid and tragic atmosphere in La Guma’s works as one “that makes interesting reading”(59). Pejorism also makes the work a little melodramatic while the political message seems to have been a little obscured by the overriding emphasis on the moral vision. All these do not, however, detract from La Guma’s realism and his handling of the contrastive juxtaposition of events in the novel. On the whole, one surely agrees with Asein (1987:96):

Whatever may be the imperfections in some of the episodes of situations as artistic creations *And a Threefold Cord* is a novel

in which La Guma sustains a conventional narrative structure with great artistic force.

### Conclusion

This paper has all along concerned itself with an indepth exploration of pejorism in La Guma's *And a Threefold Cord*. It has been discovered that the novelist veers into the terrain of the pejorative in his conscious objective to portray the real life situations of the non-whites under the grinding machinery of apartheid in South Africa. Pejorism, therefore, to the radical novelist, is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. La Guma is therefore not necessarily a dark writer "in the sense that Milton was a dark writer, Rembrandt a dark painter and Schopenhauer a dark philosopher" (Nnolim, 1982:222).

La Guma's pejorism consolidates his social criticism and the pungency of his censure. The stifling realities of life for the hapless non-whites in South Africa are presented not only to validate the need for the struggle against the system but also to move people all over the world to better them. This is, no doubt, a basic reason that validates Lewis Nkosi's assertion that:

As a novelist of social commitment, La Guma still holds an enviable position in South African literature with a frequency which few can match. He still manages to find the exact metaphor for the cancer which is eating away at the country's entrails, (1973: 116).

La Guma's radical political position in defence of the oppressed black masses is a function of his Marxist persuasion. But beyond this was his personal experience in the crime-ridden District Six. According to Anders Breidlid "even though he would not be defined as belonging to the proletariat of District Six, his experience with the oppressed people so close at hand was determinative of his ideological course of direction"(1).

Since April 1994, the Republic of South Africa has become a democratic country under the leadership of the black Africans. It does imply that *And a Threefold Cord* like many anti-apartheid novels has become a recreated historical experience of the non-whites under the apartheid regime. One of the objectives of recreated historical experiences is that literary critics should be able to "use such experience as a frame-work for investigating a universal phenomenon", (Eghagha, 1996:7). The pride of place given to the repelling filth, decadence and disintegration in the slums of South Africa as well as the sympathetic treatment of the characters that live there goes beyond the boundaries of South Africa. It demonstrates La Guma's unflagging commitment to the cause of the dehumanized, oppressed and brutalized

people all over the world be they in the slums of Ajegunle and Makoko in Lagos, Nigeria or Rio de Janeiro's favelas where the marginalized and frustrated can only succeed in "hanging their whole private life on a nail" (Lean, 1992:5). Pejorism, like violence, has its own odious power which forces conscientious people to pay attention. Pejorism in *And a Threefold Cord* actually shows us humanity groveling in the mud of deprivation, degradation and dehumanization.

#### **Note**

Many African intellectuals were angered by what they called Armah's rather obsession with scatological language and negative image of Africa in his first three novels. His fellow country woman, Ama Ata Aidoo, complained that Armah did not mention "whatever is beautiful and genuinely pleasing in Ghana or about Ghanaians". Ben Obumsele stated that Armah was suffering from a "misanthropic neurosis that was characteristic of exiled imagination" while Achebe saw Armah as "an alienated native--- writing like some white District Officer". This does necessarily imply that pejorism always generates such reactions.

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